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ABSTRACT

Public control of the schools has steadily eroded in recent years. Population growth and widespread consolidation of school districts, depoliticization of school board elections, adoption of the business model of professional school management, development of a multilevel school bureaucracy, and unionization of teachers all have combined to substantially lessen public control of the schools. Two approaches to reforms that may help restore public control are now being considered: (1) reduction of the size or redefinition of the basic management unit of schooling in order to restore personal contact between administrators and the public and (2) introduction of market choices or measures designed to increase direct citizen participation in school decisionmaking. An experimental school voucher plan that allows parents to choose the school their children will attend is now being tested in the Alum Rock district near San Jose, California. Another plan being tried in Florida makes each school site responsible for its own budgeting and accounting and provides an elected Parent Advisory Council to advise the principal. Although it is still too early to evaluate either experiment, both of these reform efforts seem to promise ways to increase public control of the schools. (Author/JG)

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY

Public Control of Public Schools: Can We Get It Back?

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Introduction

Who governs America's public schools? Conventional wisdom and democratic ideology hold that the social services crucial to the public's welfare and survival should be subject to the public's will. Schooling is no exception. The United States has a long history of citizen control over public education, but since World War II the balance has shifted markedly. Changes such as population growth, urbanism, school district consolidation, and the unionization of teachers have combined subtly, but steadily, to erode the public's control over its schools. The erosion seems general, although it varies among states and among local school districts.

It has become apparent recently that the public's consciousness has been raised. Numerous citizen groups have been formed expressly to regain a measure of power and influence over the schools. Through what reforms can these citizens restore control? What are the conditions that led to loss of public power in the first place?

These are the major questions to be treated, after a brief description of the magnitude of the public school enterprise; they are intended to demonstrate that the issue at hand is control of a major portion of the nation's entire public sector. Few outside the education profession realize the awesome extent and range of American education.

The Magnitude of Public Schooling[1]

Once only the children of an elite few were educated, but now elementary and secondary schooling is practically universal in this country. In the 1972–73 school year, there were 51.1 million enrolled children between the ages of five and seventeen. Of this number, 50.8 million were enrolled in grades kindergarten through twelve. More than 90 percent of these were in *public* schools. To serve this school population, almost 3 million classroom teachers and other educational professionals are on the public's payroll. Thus educators and their families now account for a larger segment of our population than the historically powerful farm bloc. Moreover, they are becoming as well organized as agriculture, with all the implications that such capability portends in political influence.

Expenditure

It takes a lot of money to support such an operation. Total 1973 school expenditures were almost $52 billion exclusive of construction costs.[2] This is approximately one half of all local government expenditures. Accordingly Americans spend almost as much local money for schools as they do for *all* other local services combined: e.g., fire, police, safety. In addition, the price of education has been increasing rapidly. In 1940 the national average expenditure per pupil in grades kindergarten through twelve was $100. The equivalent figure today is $1,000 per pupil. Even discounting for raging rates of inflation, real dollar increases in school expenditures have escalated fivefold in three decades. These increases outstrip growth in our Gross National Product. Moreover, even though the rate of increase is likely to slow in the next several years, the U. S. Office of Education predicts that public elementary and secondary expenditures will exceed $70 billion by 1982–83. No other major industrialized nation has seen fit to invest so heavily in the public schooling of its youth. Thus, it is somewhat ironic that, in the face of such faith and commitment, the public should increasingly be denied a say in how schools are run.

Erosion of Citizen Control

Our thesis is simple. The public no longer completely controls one of its major institutions, the schools. This loss of power has not been the result of any simple process, or set of recently evolved conspiracies. Moreover, not all parts of this power shift are unique to public education. In some ways, bureaucratization and the blighting concept that "bigger is better" have drained citizen control from many branches of government. But few endeavors are as crucial as schools to the maintenance and cohesion of society. Consequently it is essential to understand the forces eroding the public's ability to shape public education.

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Population Growth

Early development of America was dominated by small towns and face-to-face communication; close personal contacts were the rule. The school was frequently the focal point for town activity: meetings, government functions, and social events. Each town was legally constituted as a school district with a board of school trustees having widespread responsibilities. They were expected to hire and fire the teachers, maintain the school physical facilities and equipment, order supplies, and keep accounts. Then, there were no professional school administrators to whom such duties could be delegated.

Proliferation of Districts

As our population grew and moved westward, the number of school districts proliferated. At the peak of their expansion, in the late 1800's, there were more than 100,000 operating school districts throughout the nation. These were by far the most numerous units of government. Initially, school boards tended to be comprised of three members. In time, the modal number grew to five. By 1900, the ratio of trustees to citizens was one to 200. It was quite possible for a district's trustees to outnumber its teachers or perhaps even its pupils.

"Cleansing" and Consolidation

The transition to the twentieth century was marked by a great cleansing of local government, including education.[3] The "muckrakers" found that schools came in for their share of poor management and corruption. This was particularly true in our largest cities, where schools frequently were under the control of ward-based political machines. Teaching jobs and school construction contracts were a regular part of the widely accepted spoils system.

Reformers had a dramatic impact upon schools then, and their influence is still felt. In order to insulate schools from the "evils" of partisan politics and to gain greater efficiency, a move was begun to consolidate schools into larger districts, to have citywide central school boards, and to rely more heavily on professional school administrators.

The school district consolidation movement has been remarkably effective. By the Fall of 1962, the number of districts had been reduced threefold to only slightly more than 33,000. In the following decade, the number shrank even further to its present 16,000 (approximate). Thus, one of the largest and perhaps most important local governmental changes in our nation's history—a five or sixfold reduction in public school districts—has gone virtually unnoticed.

Consolidation of school districts, and the consequent reduction in numbers of school boards and school trustees, occurred during a vast population increase, especially of urban population. While large numbers of school districts were being consolidated out of existence, the citizenry grew by approximately 70 million people.

Consequently, where a school board member once represented about 200 people, today each board member must speak for approximately 3,000 constituents. The variation around this mean is wide, and in cities such as New York and Los Angeles, each trustee must translate the will of literally millions of his fellow laymen. In general, school board members are now but a minuscule group relative to the size of their constituency, students, and staff. Their ability to sense and articulate the values and desires of their constituents, and translate them into policy, has correspondingly dwindled.

Depoliticization, Bureaucratization, and Unionization

Turn-of-the-century governmental reformers believed strongly that political machines, bossism, and local corruption were caused by an excess of democracy. By permitting cities to be organized on the basis of subunits and wards, unscrupulous politicians had too many opportunities to rise to power. The answer was to centralize many governmental functions into citywide systems. Thus the reformers hoped to attract higher caliber public servants by increasing the visibility, responsibility, and honor attached to public service. In large measure, for municipal services, these reform efforts were successful.

Education in particular was to be insulated from partisan politics. Ward school districts gave way to centralized city school boards that were held separate from city councils, the mayor's office, or other bodies of general government. Schools were to have their own special government outside the sphere of politics.

Further, separate election procedures and qualifications were established for school board members. In many places, school trustee candidates were prohibited from running as members of a political party. Furthermore, school board elections were moved to "off years" and "off months" so as not to coincide with other elections. In addition, school boards were given their own taxing power, presumably free from even the slightest taint of partisanship.

The Business Model

To ensure further that schools were not tied to petty political wheeling and dealing, reformers advocated the appointment of "professional" school managers, trained experts in the operation of schools. Schools were to model themselves after businesses. All decisions were to be based on expert managerial judgment, and managers were to meet criteria of efficiency and productivity. Once they had evolved broad "corporate strategy," school board members were not supposed to interfere in the running of schools any more than a group of stockholders or business board members would think of telling a plant foreman or manager how to fix a broken machine. The new ideology drew a line between policy setting and administration, and laymen were not to cross over into the sacred, politically sanitized realm of professional school administration.

As enrollment increased, the idea of a cadre of trained professional school administrators was attractive for several reasons. The growth of cities combined with the elimination of many small, ward-based city districts, meant that school board members could no longer act as executive officers. Control problems had

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simply begun to exceed their managerial grasp, and it made good sense for professionals to run the school in accord with board-established policies.

Expansion of Staff

As numbers of students increased, numbers of teachers, counselors, and other employees increased as well. Such expanded staffs demanded, in turn, more school administrators. Thus, there began to evolve a bureaucracy of school professionals whose ostensible function was to translate board-determined policy into the details of educational practice. One outcome was the interposition of several layers between school board members and the classroom teacher. Such bureaucratic entities include, for example, the superintendent of schools, his immediate staff, and assorted other "central office" personnel concerned with accounting, supplies, curriculum coordination and personnel matters. On individual school sites, the administrative hierarchy may consist of a principal and several intermediaries above the level of teachers and students.

Alienation of Teachers

Bureaucracy and bigness have not only reduced the potency of public policy makers, but also severely curtailed teachers' feelings of efficacy. As school systems grew and came under the dominance of expert managers, teachers lost their ability to communicate freely with their employers, school trustees or even with the superintendent and his staff. In most schools, the principal was still available to teachers, but his power had become so severely eroded that he was seldom able to comply with a teacher's request or resolve grievances. The frustration was heightened as city schools became more populated by children from low income households and minority groups whose backgrounds and values were frequently at odds with those of middle-class teachers. Under such circumstances, teacher alienation became more real and more intense. Who would hear the teacher's voice? How could teachers begin to participate in the decisions that affected them so immediately?

Unions and Teacher Power

The answer was "unions," or unions under a different name. By banding together, threatening to withhold their services and to engage in collective bargaining, teachers became a potent force. Public sector bargaining is frequently illegal, and almost nowhere are teachers granted the statutory authority to strike. Nevertheless, teachers do bargain and, on occasion, strike. The outcome has frequently been complicated by sets of contracts that specify working conditions, transfer procedures, pay, hours of work and classroom duties. Whereas they were once relatively voiceless vassals, teachers' organizational spokesmen frequently are as powerful now as a district's professional administrators. A big city board could not conceivably enact and implement a new policy without the consent of teacher spokesmen. In effect, teachers have been accorded veto power over school board policy making.

The rise in "teacher power" occurred after World War II, when many middle class citizens were moving from cities to suburbs, and minorities in the cities had not yet achieved a high degree of political awareness. Consequently, a political power vacuum was created into which teachers moved. Their ascendancy was aided by the very reforms that in an earlier era had been designed to limit citizen participation and to improve the schools.

Public's Dwindling Voice

By the beginning of the 1960's, with the efforts at depoliticization, the growth of administrative bureaucracies, and the escalation of teacher power, the public's ability to express its will regarding school policy had become badly diminished.

What difference has it made that lay decision makers now have substantially less authority than they once had? Answers are difficult. There are so few indicators of how schools are performing that it is hard to know if they are doing a better or worse job today than previously. The absence of base-line indicators and a commonly accepted measure is itself symptomatic of the problem. Professional educators have steadfastly resisted means by which school productivity could be measured. Teachers and administrators have rightly recognized that the measurement of school outputs would be a strong lever by which lay policy makers could recapture control of school operation.[4]

Schools as Monopolies

School costs provide one of the few available measures of citizen impotence in policy setting. In private sector bargaining, both sides realize that if a wage settlement is so high as to render a manufactured product uncompetitive, it will cost management profits and labor jobs. No such market pressures exist in public sector bargaining. Schools are in effect monopolies whose customers are guaranteed by compulsory attendance laws. Consequently, educational personnel costs have increased faster than over-all economic growth and faster than comparable occupations. Moreover, as suggested earlier, few if any gains in productivity have accompanied such salary increases.

Uniformity and Standardization

An additional price of depoliticization appears to have been uniformity. Under the aegis of professionals, teachers and administrators, schools have become standardized to a remarkable, some say oppressive, degree. Seldom do schools admit to the real diversity of tastes and values among their clients. If a large body of technical knowledge existed to support the rigid prescription of professional behavior, then the exclusion of lay voices regarding the nature of schooling might be better justified. However, in the absence of such scientific underpinnings for schooling, it would seem more reasonable, and ultimately more productive, to permit wider choice in the styles, modes of operation, and instructional strategies of schools.

The promotion of conflict appears to be another consequence of the erosion of lay control. Parents' and other citizens' inability to make their wishes heard provides an incentive to aggregate demands until complaints are sufficiently loud and pressing to be heard.

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Moreover, because *individual* teachers and administrators frequently have no power to alter the situation, it may be necessary to escalate the demand all the way to the school board in order to have it acted upon. Small wonder that the media increasingly portray parents petitioning and picketing board members. Citizens fear that they will go unnoticed otherwise.

What Can Be Done?

Though by no means a revolution, there is a substantial hint of reform in the air. Many of these change efforts show promise of taking root and appear worthy of careful scrutiny by policy makers. These changes are characterized by two basic features. First, an effort has been made to reduce the size or redefine the basic management unit of schooling so as to restore personal contact and clarify who is responsible for what. Second, lay participation has been increased either by injecting an element of the market place into school decisions or by enlarging the number of citizens who determine how schools should be operated.

Examples of such reforms are to be found in every region of the United States. Because space does not permit a detailed description of each, we will concentrate on two of the more interesting illustrations: a "Voucher" experiment in Alum Rock, California and School Site Governance in Florida.

Vouchers

The voucher experiment to assess the consequences of consumer choice in education, is taking place in the Alum Rock school district near San Jose, California. Financial support is provided in part by the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). The Rand Corporation and other agencies are seeking to determine the degree to which the experiment increases parent satisfaction, diversity of school offerings, teacher morale, and student performance.

In brief, the voucher plan operates as follows. For each child they intend to enroll in public schools, parents are accorded a "coupon" equal to the price of schooling.[4] This chit is then redeemable at the school selected from about two dozen choices. The problem of proximity to a child's home is in part solved by dividing each school building into several subunits (mini schools), each with a different instructional style, tone, or theme. For example, some schools emphasize the 3 R's and basic school offerings. Others have "open classrooms" in which instruction is substantially more informal. Yet other schools may emphasize the dramatic arts, science, or cultural pluralism.

The budget for a particular school (or mini school) is a function of the number of students who choose to attend. Revenues from vouchers purchase the services of teachers, counselors and other staff. (Parent choices are made sufficiently early in the preceding school year to permit orderly staff planning to take place.) If a school's enrollment decreases, it loses revenues and must decrease its staff. Conversely if enrollments increase as a consequence of parent choice, the school obtains added resources. The funds purchase either goods or services; students can be taken for field trips, guest artists and lecturers can be brought to the school, teacher aides and teachers can be hired.

The Alum Rock experiment is only now concluding its second year and it is too early to assess its overall success or failure. However, it is already clear that, when given a choice, parents will choose schools other than those assigned to them. Moreover, if dissatisfied, they will move their children. Consequently, some schools are oversubscribed and others are short of students (and funds), thus providing clear signals as to which schools are judged "good" and those that are in some fashion found wanting. Under these conditions, professional educators appear to intensify their sensitivity to the lay public by whom they are employed.

School Site Governance (Governance of Individual School Plants)

In 1973 the Florida State Legislature adopted a far reaching, but not quite radical, set of reforms intended to reinforce the responsiveness of schools to the public. The Florida Plan in the ideal has several crucial components. First, it declares the individual school site to be the basic unit for educational management, in recognition of the fact that school districts typically are such large units as to mask in their averages the performance of any individual school. Conversely, individual classrooms and teachers are too small as units for evaluation of performance. Today students have more than one teacher during the course of a day or week.

Second, each school site is provided with an elected Parent Advisory Council (PAC), with numbers proportional to the school's enrollment. Among the council's duties are the selection, in cooperation with the school district board of trustees, of the school's principal. Principals are then placed on contract, with renewal substantially influenced by the PAC.

The principal is clearly designated as the manager of the school, and selects the school staff. The principal may take the advice of the PAC regarding kinds and characteristics of teachers, but the actual selection is exclusively the principal's function. Similarly, the PAC can advise with regard to such concerns as curriculum and school discipline.

Each school district is responsible for keeping its fiscal accounts on a school-by-school basis. This permits parents, school personnel, and policy makers to assess the way resources are allocated. (Previously, Florida, and most other states, have had difficulty with funds "leaking" away from uses intended by the legislators or school board.) Under ideal circumstances, money due a school site arrives in a lump sum, with its allocation determined by a principal, school staff, and PAC.

Each school publishes an annual Report of School Progress. This document includes measures of the school's and pupils' performance during the year; it is published in local newspapers, sent home with each student, and prominently displayed in the school building. Under ideal conditions, this Report gathers basic data for districtwide and state needs.

The ultimate objective of the Florida Plan is to permit citizens to have a greater role in policy setting, to

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provide them with the data necessary for wise judgments, and to make it clear which professionals are responsible for implementing their decisions. As with Alum Rock, it is too soon to determine the degree to which the reforms will make a difference. However, there are hopeful signs. The Legislature permitted a generous phase-in period. In order to comply, each district needed to adopt the slate of reforms for only *one* of its schools during the initial year of implementation. However, somewhat surprisingly, given the intensity of some of the changes, a number of school district boards mandated that every school within their jurisdiction adopt all the reforms in the first year. Apparently, when provided with the opportunity, such districtwide lay school board members recognized the wisdom of expanding public participation in the control of public schools.

Conclusion

In schools as in other forms of governance, each generation must recognize that reform is needed. As we have seen, governmental corruption and population growth led to earlier moves for increasing professionalism, centralization and bureaucracy in the schools. These developments spawned alienation on the part of teachers and loss of responsiveness of schools to the electorate. Now reform efforts are moving toward specification of responsibility, increases in diversity, and expansion of choices for parents and students. Although the outcome is still unclear, the new wave of school reform may demolish at least some of the current roadblocks to improved public education.

NOTES

1. The following figures are from *Statistics of Trends in Education 1962–63 to 1982–83* (U. S. Government Printing Office, January 1974).
2. When non-public schooling and higher education are added, the dollar total is a staggering $89 billion.
3. The history of this transition is described well by Joseph M. Cronin in *The Control of Urban Schools* (New York: The Free Press, 1973).
4. The article by Leonard Merewitz and Stephen H. Sosnick, "Public Expenditure Analysis: Some Current Issues," *Public Affairs Report*, 14(5) (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, 1973) contains an excellent explanation of the utility of quantitative measures in the assessment of public sector activities.
5. The experiment was deliberately limited to choices of public schools so as not to risk violation of the First Amendment prohibitions regarding separation of church and state.

Note to Readers

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